

Overlooking the City of Lowell's Lower Locks

1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

1.1 A Vision for Lowell's Future

Traditionally, suburban and rural communities have used Comprehensive Master Plans to understand and manage growth and development in their remaining open or undeveloped areas. While certain areas of Lowell are subject to similar development pressures, more than 95 percent of the City has been "built out." Therefore, Lowell's planning process explores a different and broader range of issues centered around managing and guiding the ongoing redevelopment of the City's urban fabric and continuing to promote and maintain a stimulating and diverse economy, as well as attractive and desirable residential neighborhoods.

There are two major trends that Lowell has the potential to capitalize on during the next 20 years. First, after decades of large-scale out-migration from urban centers, Americans from a wide range of backgrounds have begun to once again recognize the vitality and energy of cities and embrace them as unique and desirable places to live. Secondly, as the nation's economy has become increasingly driven by service and knowledge-based industries, corporate location decisions are being driven primarily by access to creative and educated employees who can adapt to today's ever changing work environments. These Creative Class* individuals that employers are seeking tend to live in communities that are diverse, lively, possess unique character, and offer a wealth of opportunities for a high quality of life. Lowell's renaissance of the past 25 years has enabled the City to preserve and enhance these very qualities in the community, and the master planning process is designed to build upon the momentum caused by recent revitalization efforts.

The Master Plan for the City of Lowell provides the framework for development during the next 20 years, and establishes a comprehensive and shared vision of the future:

1. Lowell should be a "lifetime city," a place where people can enjoy all stages of life at a variety of income levels. People should be able to find desirable, appropriate, and affordable residential opportunities for all stages of life within Lowell's city limits.
2. Lowell should have a creative workforce that supports a diverse base of employment, retail, and commercial opportunities that meet the needs of the community and capitalizes on the City's historic, cultural, natural, and educational resources.
3. Lowell should offer a high quality of life for both current and new residents, while striving to protect and promote the unique character of its neighborhoods.
4. Lowell should retain an independent identity as a unique city, even as it becomes more closely connected to Greater Boston, to preserve the community's pride of place.

This vision for the City of Lowell is supported by a development strategy that is highlighted by a series of nine thematic goal statements listed in Chapters 3 through 11. Each broad goal is followed by specific recommendations and action steps. Chapter 2 offers an overview of Lowell's existing conditions as well as population and land use analysis and projections. This chapter, along with the more detailed existing conditions report and the extensive public opinion research reports, provides the basis for the plan's vision, thematic goals, and recommendations. Chapter 12 addresses specific projects and planning studies that will guide the implementation of this plan and provides resources for readers seeking more information or how to get involved.

* Economist Richard Florida defines the **Creative Class** as including those workers who use creativity and knowledge as the primary skills and tools in their jobs. The **Creative Class** includes architects, computer programmers, educators, craftsmen, bankers, and lawyers, along with artists, writers, and performers.



City of Lowell, MA COMPREHENSIVE MASTER PLAN May 2003



1.2 The Purpose of the Comprehensive Master Plan

The City of Lowell's Comprehensive Master Plan is an officially adopted public document that establishes long-term goals and policies, including an analysis of and recommendations for the use of land and the improvement of the transportation system, the provision of community facilities, the economy, housing, and the environment. It is a policy statement that provides a shared vision aimed at the unified and coordinated development of the City of Lowell.

The long-range policies within the plan will serve as the framework for future development, outlining the specific goals for the City of Lowell during the next 20 years. The plan will also be used to guide the location, development, and maintenance of the many facilities and services provided by the City. As such, the Master Plan will be one of the main policy tools of the City Council, the Planning Board, Zoning Board of Appeals, the City's administration, and the Division of Planning and Development (DPD), as well as other City boards and departments.

The City of Lowell has many kinds of plans for parks, streets, utilities, and land use, among others. The Master Plan encompasses these categorical plans and provides a means for relating them to one another. It is not designed to replace previous studies, but should be used to complement and recommend further research. It should be realized that the Master Plan is more than a sum of these components; it offers a comprehensive vision of Lowell's future. The term "planning process" suggests the ongoing, cyclical nature of planning and, in general, this document attempts to answer a series of questions:

Inventory: What are the existing conditions with regard to population, housing, land use, transportation, etc. in Lowell today?

Analyses and forecasting: What is projected to occur during the next 20 years in terms of population growth, housing changes, public facilities, etc.?

Goal Setting: What does the City of Lowell want and need for the future? For example, what do the citizens want or expect Lowell to be like in the upcoming years with regard to neighborhoods, parks, employment opportunities, etc?

Management Improvement: How can internal City operations be improved to strategically implement the goals outlined in the Master Plan?

Action Steps: What is the process necessary to accomplish these goals?

Implementation: What detailed studies and programs are necessary to meet the designated goals?

Monitoring: Is the Master Plan working effectively to achieve its desired goals?

By regularly reviewing and referring to this plan, decision makers can keep the Master Plan current, and future updates will be necessary since long-range planning is a continuous process.

1.3 Master Planning Process

1.3.1 DATA COLLECTION & EXISTING CONDITIONS REPORT

The first product of Lowell's Comprehensive Master Plan process was an Existing Conditions Report. Released in February 2002, it provides a snapshot of Lowell today. It is a compilation of data and information collected by Lowell's DPD that serves as the foundation for the visioning and planning of the City's direction for the future. Information has been collected through firsthand observations and other primary research (including traffic counts, land use, and public opinion data), and statistics have been compiled from various sources, such as the US Census Bureau.

1.3.2 PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH

An essential step in the process of developing a Comprehensive Master Plan is public input. Typically this input is obtained through a variety of methods including public meetings, charettes, and various survey techniques. In order to obtain public opinion data from a scientifically representative sampling of Lowell's residents, the City engaged the public opinion research firm Davidson Peterson Associates (DPA) to conduct extensive public opinion research in support of the Comprehensive Master Plan.

Working under the direction of the City of Lowell planning staff, DPA conducted a series of carefully designed exercises to obtain public input for the plan. This scope of work included a scientific and representative telephone survey of over 1,000 Lowell households as well as interviews with community leaders, a separate survey of business owners and managers, and a series of supporting focus group studies. All of this research was conducted between November 2001 and November 2002.

1.3.3 COMMUNITY ADVISORY COMMITTEE

In addition to the public opinion research conducted by DPA, DPD established a Community Advisory Committee (CAC) to more closely scrutinize the master planning process and provide input and guidance to the staff planners. CAC invitees included representative stakeholders from all elements of the Lowell community. Members were recruited through direct invitation and open solicitation of volunteers. The CAC reviewed progress on the Master Plan and provided additional direction. CAC members also participated in a series of five topical forums held in May and June of 2002. These forums addressed specific components of the Master Plan in greater detail, such as housing and neighborhoods, economic development, transportation, environmental issues, and development regulation.

1.3.4 PUBLIC MEETINGS & FORUMS

In April 2002, UMass Lowell hosted a two-day planning event in which more than 60 community leaders and residents developed a vision for the future of the city with a focus on sustainability issues. Members of the DPD staff participated in this project, and its products have been incorporated into this document.

1.3.5 DRAFT PLAN

A draft of the City's Master Plan was submitted to the City Council and Planning Board in December 2002. For the next several months, this draft was presented to a broad range of audiences at a number of open public meetings and forums to discuss individual plan strategies with target populations, as well as the overall draft Master Plan with the community as a whole. DPD staff also solicited feedback from elected and appointed municipal officials and board members.

1.3.6 ELECTED AND APPOINTED OFFICIALS

As representatives of the community, both the Lowell City Council and the Lowell Planning Board have been actively engaged in the preparation of the Comprehensive Master Plan, which will ultimately be adopted at public hearings before both bodies.

1.4 Overview of the Community

1.4.1 GEOGRAPHY & REGIONAL CONTEXT

Lowell, Massachusetts, the nation's first successfully planned industrial community, is located in northern Middlesex County in the northeastern section of Massachusetts. The City is bisected by the Merrimack and Concord Rivers and is located approximately 25 miles north of Boston. Lowell has a land area of 13.38 square miles with the remaining 0.89 square miles covered by surface water. The total area within the City border is 14.27 square miles. The Merrimack and Concord Rivers are major bodies of water that have had a tremendous impact on the development and success of Lowell.

City of Lowell, MA



Distance from:

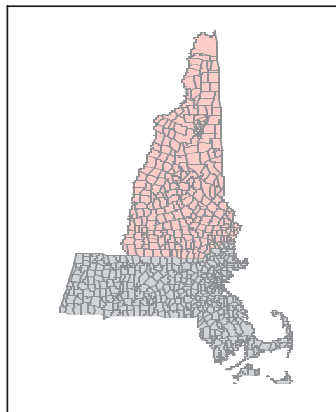
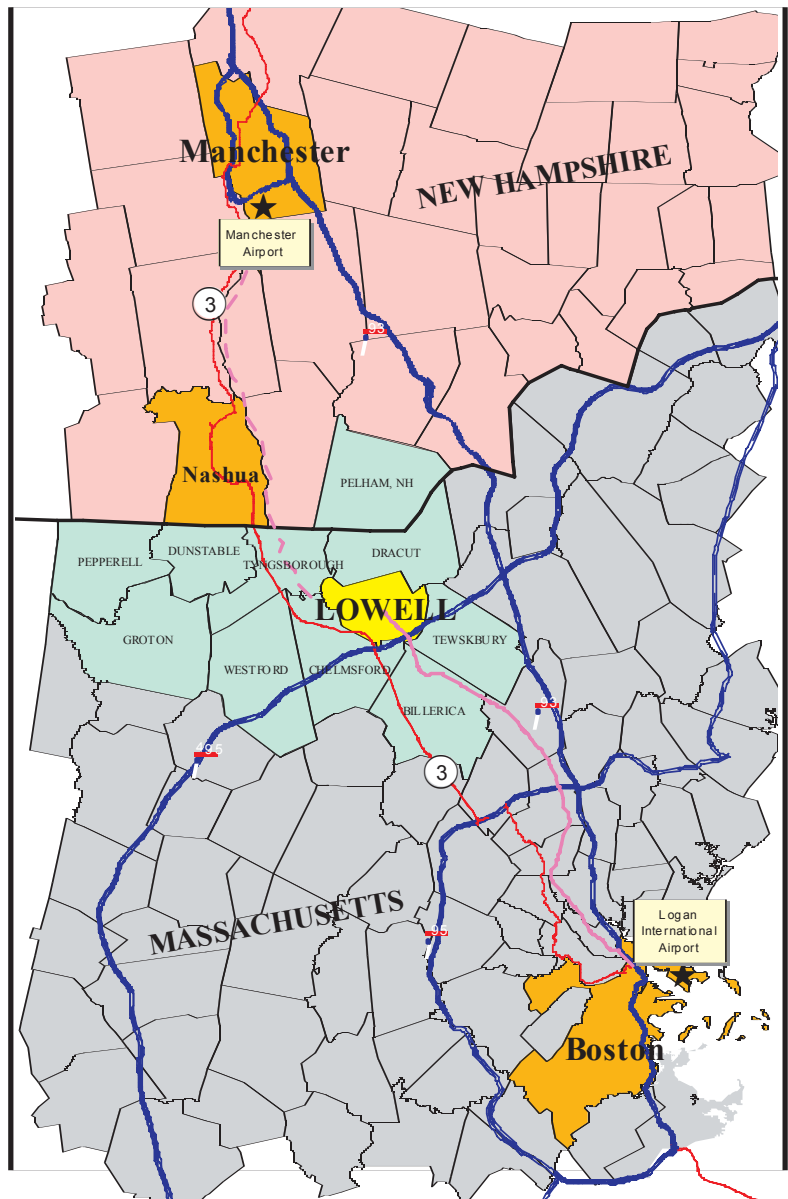
Boston, MA
(26 miles)

Manchester, NH
(25 miles)

Nashua, NH
(11 miles)



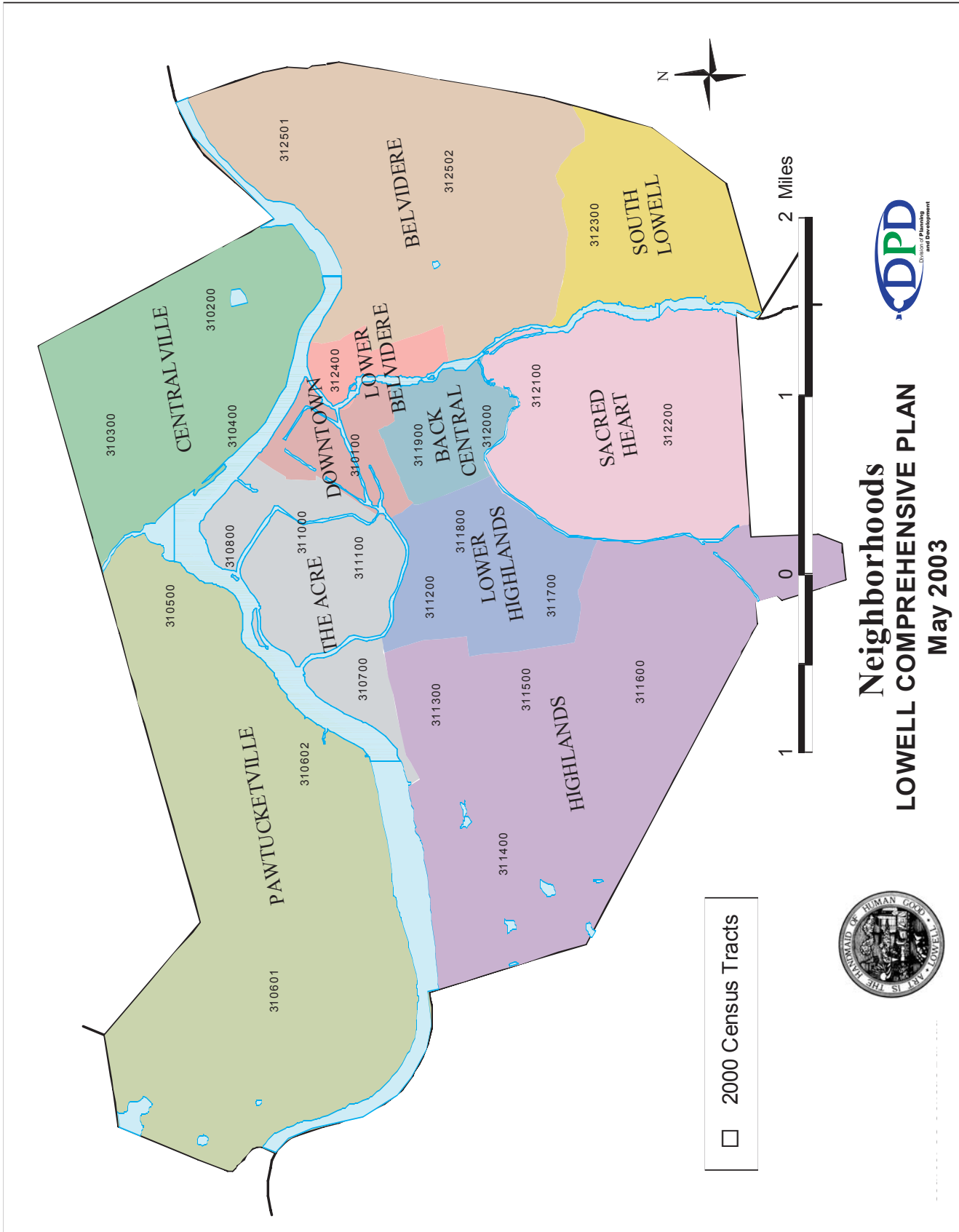
-  Proposed Train Route
-  Lowell, MA-NH PMSA (Primary Metropolitan Statistical Area)



Regional Context

LOWELL COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

May 2003



Lowell is a diverse urban/suburban community built primarily around the extensive industrial mill complexes along the Merrimack River. The industrial revolution of the 19th century gave the City its economic base, heritage, and character that are still prevalent today. Today, Lowell can be characterized as a highly urbanized community bordered by wealthier suburban white-collar communities. Lowell is surrounded by the suburban communities of Tewksbury, Chelmsford, Dracut, Billerica, and Tyngsborough. These communities have experienced dramatic changes as they evolve from their rural, agricultural past into more heavily suburbanized areas that now provide a greater proportion of the region's employment and housing.

1.4.2 HISTORY

As America's first, large-scale planned industrial community, Lowell dramatically illustrates the country's transition from an agrarian to an industrial society. The physical remains of Lowell's industrial past - 5.6 miles of canal ways, lock chambers, mills, boarding houses, bridges, and machinery - are monuments to the American Industrial Revolution. The "Venice of America", as Lowell was known, was remarkable among 19th century industrial cities for its quick ascent to fame, the symbolic value it held for America concerned with large-scale industrialization, and the sheer enormity of its industrial processes. This success largely rested on certain advantages of people, place, and timing.

Lowell's geographical location at the confluence of the Merrimack and Concord Rivers has attracted settlers to its banks for approximately 10,000 years. The site first served as an ideal location for Native American fishing camps. Early English settlers made use of the rich farmland along the rivers' floodplains. The two rivers provided an abundance of inexpensive yet reliable waterpower for the mills, the level terrain simplified subsequent construction, and the City had convenient access to Boston via the Middlesex Canal and to Newburyport via the Pawtucket Canal and the Merrimack River.

The City of Lowell was incorporated in 1826, and its mills helped transform American life with high volume mechanized manufacturing, the rise of the large corporation, and the growth of an urban working class. The rich diversity of Lowell's subsequent growth and development is displayed in its central business district and surrounding ethnic neighborhoods.

Lowell's first designers awarded mill sites and canal routes their highest priority. To facilitate the use of

**Figure 1-1
Boott Mills Courtyard**



river power, mill complexes were constructed along the banks of the Merrimack and Concord Rivers, where the force of the watercourses was greatest. As more corporations were founded, an intricate system of canals continued to evolve to provide the necessary power. Eventually, 10 canals were constructed, and as they fanned out across the landscape, they cut the city into seven islands. The rest of the community developed within the confines of the V-shaped wall formed by the mills. Here, behind the wall of mills, the corporations established the residential communities that housed mill employees and led to the formation of ethnic neighborhoods.

With the expansion of the mills during the 1830s and 1840s, a large middle class grew in three adjoining areas. Chapel Hill (today's Back Central) was the first neighborhood to develop. From here, development spread to the Belvidere section of the City. In 1834, the remaining land above Nesmith Street was annexed to the City, and then sold to developers for expensive homes during the 1840s.

By 1840, Lowell had become the principal manufacturing center of the United States, and the model for many similar ventures. The transformation from rural community to industrial center occurred in less than two decades. This was among the most rapid industrialization processes the country had ever experienced.

Centralville was settled and annexed to Lowell in 1851, and the introduction of the streetcar in the 1890s led to the development of Lowell's outlying areas, such as Tyler Park in the Highlands neighborhood. Pawtucketville became a part of the City in 1874.

As industrial output continued to expand, Lowell's workforce changed from Yankee women to foreign born, and by the 1860s the industrial system could not keep pace with the very forces it had generated. As the 19th century progressed, conditions in mills and corporate boarding houses became worse as overcrowding became prevalent. Tenement buildings were constructed throughout the city, and the neighborhoods grew to their present size.

Shortly after the turn of the century, Lowell's status was diminished when the use of alternate forms of power production became widespread. Also it was practical for many aging textile concerns to move south, where raw materials and labor were less expensive. For several decades, the City's economy stagnated and the mills and canals fell into disrepair. It would be many decades before efforts were initiated to reuse these impressive facilities.

Since the 1970s, Lowell has been experiencing a remarkable rebirth and revitalization. The designation of an urban National Historical Park to celebrate Lowell's industrial heritage, along with complimentary local and state efforts to promote historic preservation and heritage tourism have stimulated a remarkable restoration of the downtown core. A diversification of the local economy, including the technology, education, and health care sectors, has broadened the job base beyond its traditional manufacturing core. The early 1980s wave of immigration, especially from Southeast Asia and Latin America, has sustained and increased the City's population and continued its proud tradition as a welcoming community for immigrants. Lowell's return to prominence was capped by the construction of the Tsongas Arena and LeLacheur Park baseball stadium and its recognition as an All-America City in 1999.